

March 6, 2011: CALLED AND TRANSFORMED
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9; Psalm 2
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The problem with preaching transfiguration every year is the annual confrontation with my own whiney sense of having been left out of something really important. “How come I don’t get a mountaintop experience?” I’m positive Presbyterians can have mountaintop experiences, because the three disciples with Jesus that day had to have been that denomination. Why do I say that? Because when Jesus tells them not to say anything about a mind-blowing experience, they don’t. Who but a Presbyterian would keep their mouth shut after such an experience? And then, of course, there’s the opportunity to ask Jesus what it all meant and how they *just knew* it was Moses and Elijah, which they forgo in favor of a discussion about the finer points of messianic theology.

We’re getting ready for Lent, which starts this Wednesday, so theologically it makes a lot of sense to use these two stories to prepare (Jesus and Moses transfigured by the glory of God), because each story, in its own setting, is a transition for the story trajectory. Moses and Israel leave the mountain to begin 40 years of wilderness wandering. Jesus and the disciples now journey toward Jerusalem and the Passion. As we begin our own journeys through Lent, wouldn’t the memory of just such a glorious experience be the kind of thing we could use, to nourish and energize us for the next 40 days? Something to chew on and think about and focus on. What consoles me, given the singular lack of mountaintops in my life, is that even Israel (who could see what happened to Moses on the mountain), even the disciples (who had Jesus in the flesh), both of them had the same response to mountaintop experiences: fear, impatience, forgetfulness. What this says to me is that this kind of thing takes practice.

Which doesn’t let us off the hook. On the contrary, experiences of glory must be something to which we should aspire, yet every year we hear some preacher tell us, “You cannot stay on the mountain; you’ve gotta go back to the ordinary!” Are you as sick of that as I am? There has got to be more to the glory of this annual event than, “Go back to the ordinary.” Let’s not denigrate the ordinary—it’s where life is lived. But just because glory isn’t an everyday occurrence doesn’t mean it isn’t important, otherwise why would this story show up in three gospels, why would it be such a big deal for Moses and Israel? This begs the question: does it matter that we, like most Pacific Northwest Presbyterians, do not receive the glorious, supernatural, spiritual experiences of God?

I’m beginning to suspect that most of us don’t have those glorious mountain top experiences, not because they aren’t offered or because “we’d stay too long” and avoid the ordinary, but because we haven’t learned to perceive them. Georgia O’Keeffe explained her extraordinary, sensuous paintings of flowers by saying, “Nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small, we haven’t time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.”¹ For many of us, faith means learning facts about God and the Bible and trying to get others to agree with us about what they mean, taking up about one hour of our time per week. The annual invitation of Transfiguration Sunday is not “Get down off

¹ Quoted in *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 24.

that mountain!” but “What does it take to notice the glory?” Because, noticed or not, glory is always there.

I’m with O’Keeffe on this one. I think glory takes time and practice and reverence. Barbara Brown Taylor, in *An Altar in the World*, says that reverence is the *practice* of paying attention. Maybe if we developed “reverence” we’d learn to perceive glory. That might be helpful to know, because “practice” is about intentionality. We can choose to do it, and do it over and over, not being perfect at it but keeping on doing it, maybe shifting the *how* periodically. Here are some things Barbara Brown Taylor has to say about reverence as the practice of *paying attention*. As O’Keeffe says, this takes time, but one of the criteria is to notice that we aren’t God. If you’re going to practice reverence, you need to know your relative rank in the universe. Which, you may have noticed, is not God. Reverence also means a willingness to adventure, to get off track. There’s a paradox—holy distractions in the midst of paying attention—not being so on-task and goal-oriented that you miss the mountain. Reverence requires daring, as well as respect for the kinds of things that could kill you. Remember the disciples falling to their faces on the ground? That might have been fear, but reverence moves from fear to awe, because something is, indeed, greater than yourself.

Reverence for the disciples was grounded in by being touched by the hand of Jesus. John Calvin, that great respecter of God’s boundaries, said that perhaps the most powerful statement of the glory of God—the uncontainable too-muchness of God—is that God *stoops* to us, the tender statement of Jesus *touching* the disciples to calm their fears. Anything more would be too much; anything less would be abandonment. In that touch, Jesus is literally and theologically God-with-them. In Calvin’s words, “God comes to us quietly, gently, that we may draw near and not be afraid. God’s glory is majestic and so far beyond our capacity to receive it that we can take just as much of God’s glory as a human hand can hold. . . . God is so great, so majestic, so glorious, that God deigns come to us in a crumb of bread and a sip of wine, just as much of God as a hand can hold” (Willson).² Just as much as we will hold here, today.

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² Patrick J Willson, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol 1*, p. 457